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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR GOLDRICH

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: AMAL SUCCESSION: BERRI'S BITTER, FRUITLESS LEGACY

REF: 04 BEIRUT 4941

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Section 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, 67 years old, has not groomed a credible successor to lead his Amal Movement. Like almost every other Lebanese party, he has kept the line of succession murky to avoid threats to his own leadership. Berri expelled a popular Amal leader whom he had once considered as a successor. For now, a party official without a popular base is the nominal successor. Our Shia contacts consider Berri's son, Abdallah, to be the most likely successor-designate, but he has little credibility within the party or Shia community. End summary.

A party with shrinking influence

¶2. (C) Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri has tightened security around his home in Ayn el-Tinneh. Even his close advisers are searched upon entering, according to a Shia journalist. Despite the current instability and Berri's age, he has not prepared Amal in case he passes from the scene. The absence of a clear successor is a common theme in Lebanese politics, as current leaders seek to avoid any internal challenges. For example, Walid Jumblatt appointed a Shia as Vice President of his Progressive Socialist Party, knowing that a Shia could never lead the Druze community. However, given that Amal is structured around the personality of Nabih Berri, a succession battle could cripple a party already beset with declining popularity and rampant corruption (reftel).

A successor without profile

¶3. (C) Berri a few years ago appeared to be grooming a popular and dynamic young leader, MP Mohammad Baydun of Tyre, to assume the reins of Amal. The two men eventually clashed and Berri expelled Baydun from the party. Berri then pushed Politburo Vice President Nassib Ahdad through the ranks to be his presumed successor. Berri selected Ahdad because he does not have a strong personality and does not enjoy a popular base, according to Shia journalist Abbas Sabbagh who closely follows Shia affairs. Sabbagh described Ahdad as a young doctor who allegedly falsified his medical diploma from Russia. Berri can easily remove Ahdad any time he wants, according to Sabbagh. No one would protest his demise.

A son in his father's shadow

¶4. (C) Sabbagh's sources tell him that Berri is trying to groom his son, Abdallah, to assume the successor role. However, Abdallah is widely disliked in the party because he did not rise up through the ranks on his own merit like his father. His bodyguards have a reputation for stealing from the houses Abdallah visits, according to Sabbagh. Berri gave Abdallah the command of Amal military operations in southern Lebanon in 1996, but Hizballah told Syrian intelligence that Abdallah was collaborating with Israel,

thus forcing Berri to revoke his command.

¶ 15. (C) Qassim Daoud, a Tyre businessman with ties to Amal, told econoff that Abdallah is not respected in the party. Abdallah seems more interested in making money and undertaking business ventures rather than party operations. Abdallah is like his father in one way: a widespread reputation for corruption. Senior Amal officials feel they must deal with him, but do not believe he has the capability to run Amal and do not like him personally, according to Daoud. Daoud pointed out, however, that Abdallah has one key advantage: he is the gateway through which GOL development aid to the south must pass.

¶ 16. (C) Abdallah is not well-liked within the Berri family either. Berri, fed up with the stealing, once told his son to go to the United States and not come back, according to Sabbagh. Berri's wife, Randa, does not like Abdallah because he is a son by a prior marriage. She prefers her teenage son, Basil, according to an AUB professor with ties to the family. Berri's other son, Mustafa, lives in the United States and is a non-factor, according to Sabbagh.

¶ 17. (C) Some of our contacts believe Amal would fall apart once Berri dies. He has so centralized command of the party that it will fall apart without him, they argue. Daoud, who is more closely linked to Amal, believes that there would be succession contest, but in the end the Amal Politburo would select a new, but diminished, leader.

MURRAY